



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## HEBREW AND YIDDISH

### TWO PARALLEL FORCES OF JEWISH CULTURE

BY ISRAEL DAVIDSON, Jewish Theological Seminary of  
America

THE importance of Yiddish as a literature is growing from year to year. Instead of the uneducated public of thirty years ago, it has now for its readers the cultured classes as well. One generation ago Yiddish was regarded a jargon by the people who read it, and the very men who wrote it had the feeling that they were sacrificing their literary talents on the altar of utilitarianism. Those fond of figurative language called Yiddish the "maid-servant" of Hebrew. Today, this maid-servant has become her own mistress; and though she cannot boast of an ancient lineage and a glorious past, she may yet point with pride to a numerous and robust progeny, holding forth the promise of a great future. In the short space of a quarter of a century Yiddish literature has made such rapid strides that it bids fair to outstrip modern Hebrew—not of course in all branches—but at least in poetry and fiction.

This comparison between Yiddish and Hebrew has not been made to excite the odium of the Hebraists, and is not intended as an argument in favor of those who wish to make Yiddish the national tongue of the Jews. To my mind there is no room for this dispute. The question

which language shall have the ascendancy over the other has already been answered. For the past several centuries Yiddish has been the mother tongue of several million Jews; it has shown itself capable of coping with the languages of the nations among whom the Jews were dispersed, while Hebrew has failed. In Palestine, on the other hand, Hebrew has of late become the mother tongue of several thousand Jews, in spite of their Yiddish ancestry. The problem seems therefore to solve itself. As long as the Jews will remain in the dispersion Yiddish will have the ascendancy over Hebrew; if they return to an independent national life on their ancient soil Hebrew will most likely become the dominant language. The comparison I am trying to draw between Yiddish and Hebrew has therefore nothing to do with this controversy, and is intended only to accentuate the remarkable growth of Yiddish. To substantiate this comparison I shall indulge in a few statistical figures.

A little over a decade ago there appeared a comprehensive Bibliography of Hebrew literature from the time of Mendelssohn to the last decade of the nineteenth century (W. Zeitlin, *Bibliotheca Hebraica Post-Mendelssohniana*. Leipzig 1891-1895). Taking this work as the proper standard by which to gauge the progress of modern Hebrew, I found by actual counting that its whole output, for a period of almost 150 years, consisted of 3160 works. A further classification by subjects showed that the largest number of books belonged to the department of belles-lettres (1038 vols.), history and literary criticism claimed the second place (692 vols.), while philosophy took the third (614 vols.). Philology ranked fourth (431 vols.), science fifth (153 vols.), and journalism a close sixth (151

vols.). The smallest number of books fell to the arts (10 vols.), while seventy-one works were of a miscellaneous character.

Judging from these figures it is evident that modern Hebrew literature is in the main bellettristic, since that class alone comprises a third of its entire output. And yet when we begin to search in it for literary masterpieces, we are astonished to find that their number is exceedingly small. True, we must not apply the standards of European literature to modern Hebrew. We have no right to look for Shakespeares and Goethes among a people with the sorrows of centuries in his heart and the fear of the future in his soul. But we certainly have a right to apply the standards that are of his own making, and when we do, we are painfully surprised to learn how few of the writers recorded in that bibliography attain to greatness. Granting, for instance, that Mapu and Smolenskin are novelists of the first magnitude, how many other names can we place beside theirs? If we be generous we may add Brandstaedter and Braudes, but with these we must halt. In poetry we meet with equal disappointment. Gordon, Kaminer, M. Lebensohn, K. Schapiro, and, in a lesser degree, also Salkinson are worthy of the name of poets, but the rest are merely skilful versifiers to a greater or less degree. And if we add the names of the two great satirists, Erter and Perl, the two great literary critics, Frischman and Kowner, and the two great publicists, Lilienblum and Sokolow, we have reached the end of the list. This, then, is all the originality that the Haskalah movement has bequeathed to Hebrew letters.

Let us look now at the progress which Hebrew literature has made in the past twenty or thirty years. In that

short space of time it has brought forth a host of really gifted poets such as Boruchowitz, Dolitzky, Katznelson, Manne, Schneor, Jacob Steinberg, Tchernichovsky, and one great genius, Bialik, the like of whom Hebrew literature has not seen in centuries. It has given us excellent story tellers such as Bershadsky, Judah Steinberg, Feierberg, and the great Yiddish novelist, Abramowitz, has also returned to the Hebrew fold. It may point with pride to Ahad Ha'am, the greatest publicist Hebrew literature has ever produced, and may also mention Bernfeld and Klausner. It has also its humorists like Levinsky and its critics like Berditchevsky and Brainin.

Whence did this wealth of originality suddenly spring into being? Before this question can properly be answered, we must look at the still more remarkable growth of Yiddish. Starting from very poor beginnings, almost without any literary traditions, this literature has grown in the short space of twenty-five years to gigantic proportions. It is still too young to deserve a bibliographical record, but those that watch its progress must feel that not only has it equalled in numbers the Hebrew bellettristic literature of the Haskalah period but that it has surpassed it by far in strength and living vitality. It certainly keeps pace with the Hebrew literature of its own period, and in some points even goes beyond it. Where is the Hebrew artist to equal Abramowitz, unless we place his own Hebrew works side by side with his Yiddish? What Hebrew writer can measure up with the genius of Peretz? Where is the humorist to parallel Rabbinowitz? And Ash, Dienesohn, Naumburg, Pinski, Reisen, Jonah Rosenfeld, Spektor, and Weissenberg, each one of these is a name to conjure with. Behold also the galaxy of great poets. Here we have again

to reckon with Peretz, and may point with pride to such an artist as Frug, who added to his Russian laurels also those of his own people. Morris Rosenfeld is a poet of no mean powers, Schneor is looming up in the horizon of poesy and Yehoash has added in the last year alone five volumes of incomparable poetic beauty to Yiddish literature. In criticism we have Frischman, Niger, and Eliashev, and we must not forget men of such originality and depth as Vinchevsky and Zhitlowsky, not to speak of a host of other men. In fact the number of Yiddish writers is growing so fast, that I am not so sure if at this very moment there be not some half a dozen men somewhere forging their way to fame.

The fact that the extraordinary development of Hebrew and the remarkable growth of Yiddish have occurred in one and the same period of time will at once suggest the probability that there is one cause for both. This, however, is true only in so far that what has stimulated Hebrew has also affected Yiddish literature, but Yiddish had still another force behind it which furthered its growth even to the detriment of Hebrew. The remarkable progress of recent Hebrew literature is undoubtedly to be ascribed to the national movement which has instilled so much vigor in the entire Jewish people. Not only has the literature been affected by it but the very language has experienced a remarkable change. For the past twenty-five years it has kept on expanding almost from day to day. Hebrew speaking societies have sprung up in all quarters, teaching Hebrew in Hebrew is becoming the popular method, and countless new terms have been coined, though in point of style it is much to be regretted that recent Hebrew works have not that purity characteristic of the early produc-

tions. The same movement can also be made responsible for a considerable part of recent Yiddish literature. Since Zionism had to appeal to the large non-Hebrew reading public it was compelled to resort to Yiddish. But the real cause of the rapid growth of Yiddish is a much stronger force than this national movement. It is a force that may well be called international of which the national movement is only one of its many manifestations. It is in fact the characteristic force of the nineteenth century.

The last century will undoubtedly go down in history as the age of pseudo-equality. Pinning their faith to the belief that all men were born equal, the weaker classes tried to equal the stronger, those in bondage tried to become free, the meek tried to inherit the earth, and the ignorant did not hide their heads in shame but claimed that if ignorance was bliss, it was also a virtue. The large masses rose as one man and claimed recognition. Like all elemental forces, this movement of the masses broke down old barriers, and in doing so piled up new bulwarks behind which the common man rose triumphantly, demanding his share in the possessions and government of things mundane.

It was this movement of the masses that shaped the history of Europe and America in the last century. Naturally it embraced the Jews, and Zionism, which is distinctly a movement from below, is only one of the many signs of the awakening of the common people. Already in the middle of the last century, there was an uncommon stir among the Jewish masses, and those that felt the pulse of the people knew that the masses could no longer be ignored. They had to be admitted into the councils of the nation, and the only way of gaining their confidence was

through Yiddish, the tongue of the masses. Hebrew could not serve the purpose, it was the medium of the upper classes. And many a gifted writer abandoned the sacred tongue for the profane dialect. Herein lies the predominance of Yiddish over Hebrew and the secret of its remarkable progress. Being the mouthpiece of the growing masses it has grown along with the masses, and from a mere dialect has become a language showing all the force and vigor of its creators.

The above reflections, strange to say, were borne in upon me not by a work of art, but by a piece of sound philological research, a dictionary of the Hebrew elements in the Yiddish language, made by two men, not born to the profession, since one of them is a poet of high repute and the other, a physician.\* The poet Yehoash is really too many-sided to have his name associated merely with a dictionary. His original poetic works alone entitle him to wide recognition, his Yiddish translations of some of the most difficult books of the Bible in themselves mark an epoch in the development of Yiddish literature, while his Yiddish rendering of *Hiawatha* gives him a prominent place among the promoters of general culture among the Jews. But I must leave to a more facile pen to give an adequate appreciation of all his works and confine my remarks to his dictionary, the latest of his productions.

From the point of the critic, the work has left hardly anything to be desired. It shows great diligence, exactness even in minute details, perfect command of the whole field, lucidity and brevity combined. Even the most pe-

\*Yiddish Dictionary, containing all the Hebrew and Chaldaic elements of the Yiddish language, illustrated with proverbs and idiomatic expressions, compiled by DR. C. D. SPIVAK and SOL. BLOOMGARDEN (YEHOASH). New York 1911. 80. pp. XXXL + 340.



dantic among us will not succeed in finding flaws. The authors must have felt with Voltaire that "a dictionary without quotations is only a skeleton," and have therefore been unsparing in illustrations, and these illustrations make the dictionary quite readable, a qualification not generally expected of such works. The aim which the compilers set before them is twofold, to furnish material for the future Yiddish philologist, and to help those of the Yiddish reading public who have never had the necessary Hebrew training. That they have thoroughly fulfilled this useful task there can be no doubt, but it seems to me that they have unconsciously achieved a third object, which is certainly not less important.

Not many of us happen to be interested in the etymological changes which Hebrew has sustained in going through the crucible of Yiddish, but all of us undoubtedly are interested to know for what class of ideas did Yiddish borrow Hebrew terms. In other words, it is not only the philology of Yiddish that may be studied from this work, but also its psychology. And it may well be worth our while to stop and consider this point more in detail. Examining this work from this point of view, we readily discern that the Hebrew words forming part of the Yiddish language were not adopted at random but were acquired through selection—although the selection may have been unconscious. Religious ideas, for instance, and religious institutions were preferably designated by Hebrew words. Thus, to cite but a few instances "emunah," *faith*; "asur," *ritually prohibited*; "aron kodesh," *the ark of the Torah*; "arba kosot," *the four cups of wine* prescribed for the first night of Passover. Abstract ideas or philosophic conceptions were likewise expressed in Hebrew, such as

"emet," *truth*; "sheker," *falsehood*, "bitul" *negation*; "ahdut habore," *unity of God*; "ekut" *quality*, "mahut" *essence*. Many biblical, talmudical and mediæval proverbs were taken bodily into the Yiddish speech, saving thereby the effort of coining new ones. More than four hundred such proverbs are given in an appendix, while the body of the dictionary must contain at least two hundred more. Talmudic legal terms were used freely as a result of the great influence of talmudic law on Jewish life. So familiar were these terms in the mouth of everyone that they were often twisted from their original meaning for satiric or sarcastic purposes. Thus, "en raḥamim baddin," *there is no mercy before the law*, was changed to "en raḥamim bekarten, *there is no mercy in cards*; "enah meḳuddeshet," literally, *she is not betrothed*, came to be used in the sense of "I don't care." The talmudic influence on Jewish life is also shown in the use which Yiddish makes of the talmudic prepositions, conjunctions, adverbs, and particles. To count them here is useless, for their name is legion. The general knowledge of the Pentateuch among the Jews has likewise been the cause that many biblical expressions have crept into their daily conversation. In admitting his mistakes, for instance, the Yiddish speaking man will unhesitatingly use the opening phrase of the speech which the chief butler addressed to Pharaoh (Gen. 41, 9). Then there are hundreds of words so closely associated with everyday life that they could not altogether be replaced by foreign terms, such, for instance are "orah," *a guest*; "abel," *a mourner*; "bekor," *the first born*; "geṭ," *a divorce*; "ḥatan," *a bridegroom*; "minhag," *a custom*; "edut," *testimony*, and many more. Jewish history likewise contributed its share of ideas, and speaking of the Temple and its de-

struction, for instance, or of the dispersion, or of the priests and prophets, Yiddish immediately reverted to their ancient Hebrew names. Jewish legends and Jewish ethics were likewise not behind in offering their contribution to the stock of ideas. But the two most important causes for the wide dissemination of Hebrew in the Yiddish language are undoubtedly the Jewish liturgy and the Jewish love for emphasis. The knowledge of the Bible and Talmud may be considered general among the Jews, but the knowledge of prayers is truly universal. So deep-rooted are the litanies in his mind that he cannot help reverting to them at every step. As a result hundreds of liturgical expressions have become household words. Of equal influence is the Jewish tendency to indulge in emphasis. A poor man, for instance, may be called in Yiddish by the German equivalent, but a very poor man is entitled to his Hebrew name, "ebyon"; an aristocrat, especially of the haughty kind, is called "adon haggadol," a very cruel man is an "abir leb" or "akzar." A friend may be called by the German name, *Freund*, but a great friend is an "oheb neeman," great riches are "oşerot," a wife that is a real helpmate is an "eshet hayil" and the number of such terms could easily be multiplied into the hundreds. Finally Yiddish resorted to the use of Hebrew, also in cases where euphemism was necessary. We see therefore that, in spite of its outward foreign character, Yiddish is really pregnant with the spirit of the Bible and Talmud, liturgy and law, with the wisdom of the ancient rabbis and the traditions of the Jewish people—a fact which may serve as an additional reason for the force which it showed in successfully resisting for several centuries the influence of other dialects.

Undoubtedly, a closer study of this work may reveal many more observations; the above, however, are sufficient to justify the remark that, if it be true that every great historic movement witnessed a fresh translation of the Bible, it is equally true that every literary revival among the Jews witnessed the compilation of a new dictionary, from Menaḥem ben Saruḥ to Spivak and Yehoash.